

What is "Monasticism?": Further Conversations on Recent Trends

In October of 2008, I presided over a group conversation about "new monasticism" at the American Academy of Religion. I gave the first presentation (for that presentation click [here](#)), introducing the movement in general and setting the stage for the presenters which followed. The final presentation was made by Martha McAfee, who in her presentation defended the thesis that new monasticism may be new, but it is not "monastic." She argued that celibacy in particular was constitutive of what we think of as monasticism. Since these groups do not follow any form of strict rule and particularly make no vows of celibacy, they are not to be regarded as monasticism.

In my preparation for that presentation I created a little essay called "What Do We Call IT?: New "Monasticism" and the vocabulary of Religious Life" (click [here](#) for that essay). There I reviewed such terms as "religious life," "orders" and of course "monasticism." My conclusion in that essay and at that point in time was that technically speaking perhaps "monasticism" was not the best term to use to identify the movement. Nonetheless, since the time of Luther the term has been used to identify any type of connection to religious life, and new monastics seemed to me to be moving toward some kind of expression of semi-religious life. And considering that the word has stuck, I was not about to try and change the trends.

Since 2008 I have continued to hear similar concerns with the use of "monasticism" to describe the movement. One recent comment is worth discussing, however, because it arises in the midst of serious dialogue with new monastic communities and it arises in an effort to nourish new monastic life. In a recent response to a published interview of Mike Brantley and the new monastic expression *Communitas*, conducted by himself, Julian Collette--student and traveling interviewer of new religious communities (for his podcast/blog click [here](#)) offered a few of his own comments about what monasticism is. In the interview, Brantley speaks hopefully about the possibilities of embodying fresh Christian expressions in the midst of postmodernity:

...there has been a growing number of us who have see this as an exciting new opportunity to rediscover our identity as a particular people, a colony of heaven. No longer having to measure up to scientific truth or normative rationality we are free to be strange again. We are free to participate in and proclaim a strange story of the death, burial and resurrection of God in flesh. Religion is no longer just a set of beliefs but properly understood by its original meaning: a monastic way of life. We are free from the rugged individualism of the Enlightenment and can live in true community with each other.

Julian responds:

"...I do have to take issue, or at least ask for clarification, on your use of "monasticism." I don't have my Greek dictionary at my side but as I recall, the roots of the word (*monos*, *monakos*) refer to singleness (celibacy and/or withdrawal, solitude, etc.) and depicted a particular way of life within the Christian faith, a way of life that emphasized the contemplative search for God, whether in its eremitical or communal expressions. Catholics, when we think of "religious life," consider monasticism as one among many such forms of vowed, intentional, communal Christian living, whereas Protestants are tending to lump them all together under the generic heading, monasticism. My concern is that the very word is being redefined by "neo-monastics" in a conversation that, as far as I can tell, has yet to substantially include voices from the classic monastic traditions, Christian or otherwise. For my part, I want to keep emphasizing my bias: that the heart of any monastic tradition, across religious traditions, is interiority, contemplative experience, contemplative practices that dispose us to that experience (an experience which itself is always gift, grace). There can be many forms of monasticism so long as they retain this

contemplative heart; without this heart, however, I think we're simply dealing with another kind of animal."

Is a contemplative heart, a lived and practiced prayerful pursuit of relationship with God, not merely valuable, but *essential* to monasticism? Yes, we may say that monasticism is a way of being community, a way of life, but if some pattern of regular contemplative pursuit of interiority and contemplative experience is not present--is it no longer *monastic*? Just what does it mean to call oneself a "monk"? These are the questions I wish to address in the essay which follows. I will simply reflect on this discussion with language in mind. My aim is to clarify the appropriateness of the use of a term ("monasticism") to refer to a social movement and those groups of people today who identify with that movement in some measure. Yes, this paper simply addresses a question of semantics. Nonetheless, it might help, I think, to clarify the semantic history of this term a bit. Furthermore, in clarifying the appropriateness of the term, I also have other motives. I hope that my clarification of this term might also suggest a perspective that may nourish the new monastic movement itself. I will look at four examples in history to explore this theme: the earliest uses of the term *monachos*, one particular reference to the monastic life found in Palladius' early fifth-century record of his encounters with early monasticism, the way in which the early other expressions were identified in the late Middle Ages, and Martin Luther's use of related terms.

1. The Earliest Uses of *Monachos*

The seminal study of the earliest use of the Greek term *monachos* for "monk" was done by Edwin A. Judge in 1977 (to read his article, click [here](#)). In this article, Judge not only examines the document in which this word is used, but he also examines the context within which this word could have been used as it was. He suggests that this early use of *monachos*--along with the early uses of other terms (*apotaktikos* in Egypt, *ihidaya* in Syriac, *remnuoth* to others)--points to the existence of a body of devout Christians who undertook a form of life similar to that of the earlier virgins and widows and who became actually recognized as such in the early decades of the fourth century. Judge is careful to argue that while the term can--and did--refer to celibacy, its rise to recognition when and where it did indicates rather that not merely celibacy, but something novel must be involved in the rise of the term to use as an identifying label for male monks. This body of devout believers predated Antony (considered the "father" of monasticism) and was often connected to cities or villages. The earliest "monks"--however they were labeled--were neither isolated recluses nor members of communal monasteries, but rather grouped themselves together loosely in their place of living and served God and community from this location. In time this term that originally referred to local holy men, was employed to identify those who withdrew into isolation in the desert (anchorites), or to anchorites along with those who lived together in a formal community or in some kind of skete or urban collective (sometimes other kinds of "monks" were described--and condemned).

Other scholars of monasticism still repeat stereotypes of the term "monachos": William Harmless, in his masterful introduction to the literature of the desert describes the cell of an anchorite as the place where "the monk became what he was called to be: a solitary. That, after all, is what "monk" *monachos*, means: one who is alone." (*Desert Christians*, 228). The commentators of the official translation of the Rule of Benedict disagree, arguing that "the sum of the evidence suggests, then, that in the early fourth century the term *monachos*, far from denoting in the first instance the solitary in the sense of hermit or anchorite, was used rather to refer to those who were solitary or single in the sense of unmarried or celibate" (RB 1980, 310).

Nevertheless, on the whole, Judge's suggestion has been well received, a point made by Harmless in the last chapter of his book. James E. Goehring has developed Judge's hypotheses even further, suggesting the presence of a plurality of monastic expressions recognized as monastic (or apotaktic) prior to Antony (see his *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert*). Consensus seems to be emerging

among scholars that identification of *monachos* with desert withdrawal or mere celibacy was more a feature of the popularization and institutionalization of certain forms of religious life in the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

But what does this have to do with our question about contemplation? I think it does. As I read the early monastic literature, the contemplative dimension does not arise as the defining feature of the early monastic, though undoubtedly it appears at the onset of both the anchoritic and cenobitic forms of life. What to me seems more *defining* of monasticism is renunciation, the abandonment of family, career and other worldly frameworks of living, and the accompanying commitment to live an alternative life. Marilyn Dunn speaks about "the appearance in the Christian world of individuals or communities strictly separated from the world and devoted to a life of religious contemplation or service" (*The Emergence of Monasticism*, 1). Note her language: a life of religious *contemplation or service*. It is the separation and religious devotion that are defining: the forms through which the separation or devotion are expressed vary.

2. Palladius and the story of Paesius and Isaias (for the full story, click [here](#))

Palladius was a tourist and participant in early monasticism. He visited many expressions, was mentored by Evagrius of Ponticus, and ultimately documented his experiences in the well-known *Lausaic History*. I recount the story of Paesius and Isaias (chapter XIV) because it excellently illustrates Palladius' view of the monastic life. The story concerns two sons of a Spanish merchant who, after their father's death, inherit his estate. Rather than continuing with their father's trade they "embrace the monastic life." But there was a difference for "they applied themselves each to his purpose of pleasing God, but by different tactics." One son sold everything and devoted himself to asceticism, prayer and a trade by which he could support this simple life. The other sold nothing, but rather built a monastery and used it to welcome the poor, elderly and invalid, "preparing three or four tables every Sunday and Saturday." After these two died there was a great debate about who gave God the greatest pleasure. To make a long story short, in the end the blessed Pambo--a well-recognized abba--received a revelation from God in which he saw them both standing before God in Paradise.

Now to make a few points based on this story. First, Palladius is clear, they *both* renounced "the world" and embraced the monastic life. For Palladius, as Marilyn Dunn expressed above, both forms are authentically "monastic." Second is the nature of the monastic life: it is described not as a life of prayer or a life of celibacy (though these might be included or assumed). It is described explicitly as a life of "pleasing God." What is central here is a life fully devoted to pleasing God, however this is expressed. This is how Palladius describes the monastic life. It is a life wholly-devoted to God and this in contrast to a life lived in orientation to ordinary family and business pursuits. One way of describing this life which is not a "life of the world" is simply to see it as a life given over to "pleasing God." Finally, the obvious point of the story is that the forms of monastic life vary. For the one, asceticism and prayer are primary; for the other it is about a life of service. One of Palladius' aims in his *Lausaic History* was to document the variety of monastic expressions. Reading the whole of Palladius' work will give the reader a rich sample of the wide variety of monastic life in the fourth century.

A Note on Early Medieval Monasticism and Prayer

To make a long and complicated story short, by the tenth century the terms "monasticism," "monk/nun" and "monastery/convent" became identified with officially recognized communities. Monasticism meant a set of formal vows, a Rule, an Abbot/Abbess, a cloister, and the daily office of prayer. This meaning was not only a matter of popular understanding, but was also made official by means of various ecclesiastical regulations established during the Middle Ages. *This* is the use of "monasticism" used by Martha McAfee in her presentation to AAR. And in these communities of

monks (and especially in the West - there are diverse traditions in the East), common prayer is central. The daily office developed within the fourth century, but was increasingly codified in the fifth century. Through the Benedictine system in particular, the times of common prayer were a central, if not *the* central element of monastic existence. Note: I say *prayer*, not necessarily contemplation. It is probably fair to say that the contemplative element has been more or less vital to different monasteries in different periods. Consider, for example, Thomas Merton's complaints about the lack of place for the contemplative element in the midst of the rigorous rhythm of Trappist life. Jean LeClerc's monumental *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* points to a monastic culture in which the contemplative element was assumed to be intimately connected to the act of reading and study. Certainly Bernard of Clairvaux saw monastic life in light of the contemplative pursuit. Was Bernard characteristic of abbots? I'm not so sure. Certainly prayer--common prayer--was expected and pervasive. Would it be fair to say that the contemplative dimension was the defining feature of monasticism, even among the Medieval Benedictines? I'm not so sure.

Late Medieval Developments: Knights, Canons, Friars, and Such

A medieval monk was a vowed religious who lived in a monastery under a rule and an Abbot. This was "monasticism" as understood by Catholic authority. And to a certain extent it still is. What happened was that the Church had to invent new language to describe the variety of other expressions of intentional devoted Christian living that emerged through the centuries. When a team of people was sent from Europe to found a hospital to care for the pilgrims visiting the Holy Land (and later to defend the Holy Land), the various Orders of Knights were established. They were not "monks" and yet they did take certain vows and lived according to a Rule of sorts. Ultimately they received status as "religious": yet they were full members neither of the diocesan system nor of the monastic system. Likewise, when groups of devout clergy sought to restore the purity of their communities serving the cathedrals of the Middle Ages--and when legislation was developed to support this renewal of clerical life--what emerged was the establishment of formal orders of "regular canons" (I have written about regular canons and canonesses elsewhere -- click [here](#)) Once again, the regular canons were not monks (they were not cloistered). Yet neither were they ordinary diocesan priests (they lived in common and according to a rule--a *regula*, hence the term "regular" canons). One historian speaks of the canons as being a "quasi-monastic state" (Doley Moss, *Of Cell and Cloister: Catholic Religious Orders Through the Ages*, 25). Similarly, when Francis and Dominic petitioned the Pope to approve the founding documents of their Orders, still other terms were devised to describe the groups of Franciscans, Dominicans and such who wished simply to follow Jesus in poverty and itinerant ministry. They were called friars or mendicants. They were not "monks," for as they themselves stated, "The whole world is our cloister." And they did not have abbots, but made other arrangements for self-regulation as an order. Nonetheless, the mendicant orders were required to take vows and say the prayers of the divine office as best they could (the Dominicans specifically made arrangements to be relieved of the obligation to say the divine office if ministry needs required them elsewhere). The requirements of canon law became increasingly complicated during this period, as monastery, Order, Rule, constitution, society, and other entities began to be carefully differentiated. This made it well nigh impossible to identify the variety of informal semi-monastic expressions which emerged in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Beguines, Beghards, Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, loose collections of Tertiaries and more popped up throughout Europe. One significant factor contributing to the rise of these groups was a desire for many to devote themselves to Christ through active ministry without the strict requirements of what medieval society understood to be "monastic" life: rule, vows, abbot/abbess, cloister and such. Most of these informal groups explored ways of approximating the elements of monastic life yet enabling a greater degree of freedom and particularly empowered people to serve others in their communities. The official Catholic language, however, shied from calling these groups "monastic." As Julian Collette describes in his blog response, "Catholics, when we think of "religious

life," consider monasticism as one among many such forms of vowed, intentional, communal Christian living." The variety of lifestyles that Palladius might identify as "monasticism" were, by the Late Middle Ages, officially identified as "religious life," with monasticism being understood as one form of embodying that religious life.

Luther

Martin Luther was trained in the mendicant order of the Augustinians. He well knew the distinctions between those who were cloistered and those who were not. He knew the difference between abbots and brothers. He also was acquainted with the semi-monastic expressions of the late medieval era (he translated and published the *Theologia Germanica*, a document which emerged from these circles, for his followers' edification). And yet in his writings, he generally lumps them altogether under the term "monk" (monastery, monastic, etc.). In his condemnation of monastic life, it appears that Luther comprehended under the term "monastic" all those expressions known by canon law under the terms "religious life" or "religious institution".

A couple of examples will have to suffice, but it is important to realize that these examples are not merely isolated instances of Luther's use of "monasticism" but rather are characteristic of his understanding and use of the term. In his treatise "On the Three Kinds of Good Life" (*Works* 44.236), Luther states that "Priests, monks, nuns, bishops, and all the clergy wear clothes different from the general run of people. They also do other kinds of jobs, wear sacred vestments in church, pray, sing, and so on." Notice that Luther uses the term "monk"/"nun" to identify anyone vowed to religious life. Similarly, in his letter "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nations" (*Works* 44.176), he says that "I am not referring here to popes, bishops, canons, and monks," canons serving as a middle category between bishops/priests and monks. Luther makes no distinctions between friars, brothers of the common life, cloistered Benedictines, and so on. They are *all* "monks." Indeed in "The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows" (*Works* 44.354), he argues against what he perceives to be a works-righteousness of the monks. He states that,

"The monks teach that Scripture is to be understood in such a way that the things which are said about the commandments of God apply to the commandments of men, and the things which are said against the commandments of men apply to the commandments of God. Obstinate applying this kind of obedience, then, the Minorite does not give his neighbor a helping hand or offer him a red cent even if he is dying and in dire need. As far as he is concerned, his brother can perish in hunger, nakedness, and need. And afterward he boasts to God that obedience was better than sacrifice. In plain words it means that in his baptism he vowed obedience to God, but in the monastery he nullified this by a novel obedience to men."

What is important to note in this citation is that Luther uses the term "monk" and then argues about the faults of monasticism by illustrating from the case of the "Minorite," namely a Franciscan. Here a friar (not considered "monastic" by medieval semantics) is identified as monk by Luther. And he assumed that his readers would understand him!

The *Oxford English Dictionary* follows this history of the term "monastic" in identifying both a narrow and a broad understanding of the term. Within formal Catholic parlance, the term "monk" refers to one particular form of religious life, whereas outside that community the term is used to mean anyone who has made some formal commitment to religious life.

Needless to say, Luther did not see contemplation or the contemplative element as the defining feature of monastic life. For Luther monastic life was identified with a whole institution of vestments, vows, authorities, regulations and such which in his time was a hindrance to authentic relationship with God.

Conclusion: Monasticism Today

Since Luther, the situation has only gotten more complex in the Roman Catholic church. With the foundation of the Jesuits and then later the Daughters of Charity under Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac, the identification of "orders" and "societies" and "congregations" were expanded greatly. The terms and regulations have accumulated such that accurate identification of particular groupings is exceptionally complicated today. Furthermore, apostolic orders and societies have multiplied such that service (not contemplation) has become a primary focus of Catholic religious life. The vast majority of Catholic religious today are members of service-oriented societies and congregations.

And yet, it is neither the *service* nor the *contemplation* that identifies these groups as "religious," or what Palladius might have called "monastic." What is most characteristic about their life is their commitment to a different way of life from the world, a "vowed" life, a "consecrated" life. What this means I would not understand contemplation (as Julian Collette suggested) as the defining feature of monasticism old or new. But I would also not understand radical social justice commitment or even compassionate service as a defining feature of monasticism. I would not even identify intentional community as the defining feature of monasticism, as intentional solitaries have been one expression of monastic life throughout its history. Each of these are important elements of a life given over to God (and I think we would do well to heed Collette's words about the importance of contemplation and the interior life), but none is definitive.

More and more I am thinking about religious life, about "monasticism" as a matter of identity. Monks are people who think they are different from most people. This is about a sense of personal calling and a sense of distinction of roles in society. It is NOT a matter of some kind of eliteism. To remind us of Mike Brantley's comments once again, he writes of,

an exciting new opportunity to rediscover our identity as a particular people, a colony of heaven. No longer having to measure up to scientific truth or normative rationality we are free to be strange again. We are free to participate in and proclaim a strange story of the death, burial and resurrection of God in flesh. Religion is no longer just a set of beliefs but properly understood by its original meaning: a monastic way of life.

While I think of prayer and contemplation as a vital element in this enterprise, I must ultimately come down semantically on the side of Mike Brantley. The monastic way of life is about being a new kind of person/people, renunciants: people who have rejected the way of life of our contemporary society and who have sought to live--in a distinctly Jesus manner--in a new kind of life.

But to describe what this is about would take a book. Perhaps someday.